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## INDIAN TRAP PITS ALONG THE MISSOURI

By A. HRDLIČKA

**D**URING the writer's recent visit to the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, South Dakota, he observed in passing over the low hills along the Missouri, numbers of circular depressions in the prairie-like surface of the slopes, the significance of which for a time was very puzzling. The depressions are, as a rule, circular, shallow, of moderate size (the hollow averaging perhaps less than five feet) and surrounded by somewhat elevated unbroken rims. They are scattered irregularly over the surface, and are quite numerous in certain localities. The first impression was that they might be the sites of lodges, but there were no signs of occupation in the way of potsherds or other refuse such as is generally found about even temporary habitations. Larger depressions of like nature, which are plainly enough the remains of habitations, exist in other localities along the Missouri, as, on a low island belonging to the Agency. Another thought was that they might indicate caved-in burials.

Accompanied by Mr. Fred. C. Campbell, Superintendent of the Cheyenne River Indian Agency, and several of his employees, the writer excavated and carefully examined a number of the depressions found on the slopes about a mile from the Agency; but found nothing that would give a clue as to the purpose of the pits. An employee of the Agency interested in archeological collecting, who had previously dug into some of the depressions, told us that in a few instances he found in them, well beneath the surface, what appeared to be rafters of cedar. Stunted cedars occur in neighboring ravines. He led us to one such pit, where by digging, we found some nearly decayed pieces of cedar rafters; but even this threw no light on the purpose of the depressions. It was suggested that they might be the remains of roasting pits in which the Indians "barbecued" deer or parts of the buffalo, which in view of similar

practices by widely scattered American tribes, did not seem unreasonable.

Shortly after the writer left for the Fort Yates Reservation in North Dakota, and in looking for burials he came across similar depressions on the gentle slopes in the neighborhood of the "Farm School," not far from the Missouri. Inquiries as to their purpose were made among the Indians, with interesting results. A Sioux declared, without hesitation, that the depressions were the remains of excavations made by members of his tribe up to relatively recent times for the purpose of catching hawks and eagles, whose feathers were in great demand. As the country is barren of trees, there was no chance of shooting the birds with a bow and arrow, and little even with a gun. So they made excavations in the ground which would accommodate a man and covered them with stout sticks. Then a man would crawl in and a jack-rabbit, alive or fixed as if alive, was tied to the rafters, or in front of them. An eagle or a hawk, upon espying the rabbit, and not seeing the man in the dark hole beneath, would pounce upon the former, whereupon the Indian would quickly seize the bird by the feet, pull it under the rafters into the dark, and wring its neck.

This accounts for all the conditions met with in connection with these depressions; the trap itself being a good illustration of the inventiveness of the Indian.

On the writer's return, in narrating the above experience to Prof. Holmes, the latter pointed to a somewhat similar contrivance in use by the Tulare Indians of California.<sup>1</sup> In this case the birds sought were pigeons, and instead of holes in the ground, which would be difficult or impossible to make on the rocky sites, the Indians made surface shelters with small platforms in front on which the bait was placed.

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<sup>1</sup> Holmes, Wm. H., "Anthropological Studies in California," *Report U. S. National Museum for 1900*, Washington, 1902, pp. 155 et seq., pl. 32.